

Are There Concepts/Theories of Truth in Classical Chinese Philosophy?

JAAP VAN BRAKEL

University of Leuven, Belgium (jaap.vanbrakel@kuleuven.be)

ALEXUS MCLEOD, *Theories of Truth in Chinese Philosophy: A Comparative Approach*, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016, 197+viii pages.

The main argument of the book under review is to show that one can find a pluralistic theory of *shí* 實 (= truth?) in the *Lunheng* (published 80 CE), “prepared” by a range of sources in the Warring States Period in China (479–221 BCE). This argument is not convincing because of small inconsistencies and major unsupported stipulations (see below). Nevertheless the book contains many perceptive and suggestive remarks concerning the texts discussed.

The author starts by stipulating his main presupposition: Truth is a universal, foundational, abstract, informative, normative, shared concept in human thought (ix, xvi, 1, 5, 33–4, 74, 106, 161, 175, 183). It is a requisite for any intellectual activity (including philosophy, poetry and religion, but perhaps not music and painting). Different cultures/traditions will have different senses of this basic notion, but all traditions (implicitly) are committed to a “correspondence intuition” (6, 26, 29–33, 50, 52), explained in terms of “how things are” (x), “getting things right” (18); “grounding both *the way things are* and *what we ought to do*” (33, 64). Hence, it should not come as a surprise that “early Chinese thinkers must have had a conception of truth” (106). There is “a *concept* of truth at work in all early Chinese philosophical texts” (43), but not all of them construct “theories of truth” (as the title of the book might suggest).

In chapter one, the author takes as his starting point discussions about truth in analytic philosophy, because that is what the author and most of his readers are familiar with (xv, 1–2). Analytic philosophy focuses on “linguistic entities with assertoric content” and that will be the focus of the author (2), although this approach is “getting it wrong” (35) in the sense of neglecting the multiple other senses of truth; about which the author makes a range of sympathetic comments, including a brief discussion of Shakespeare’s and the Aztecs’ notions of truth (35–7, 176–77). To avoid problems with the notions of sentence and proposition, the author chooses “statements” (*yán* 言) as truth-bearers (4, 10).

In chapter one the author also addresses the work of the sinologists Chad Hansen and Hall and Ames, which he sees as his “opponents.” Hansen has argued for the past twenty years “not to use ‘true’ as a translation for any single word of Classical Chinese.” He is criticized by the author for not considering texts from the Han period (which include the *Lunheng*). Further, Hansen is “fixated on sentences” (15) and does not acknowledge that a *míng* 名 (name?) can be a statement having assertoric content and truth value (10–13, 51, 73, 80–82, 93–94).

Although the author criticizes the “overarching claims” of Hall and Ames “about a so-called ‘Chinese thought’” (25), he himself invokes “overarching themes in philosophical thought” (xvi), such as “about the concept of truth” (5).

In chapters two to six the author discusses concepts and theories of truth he finds in the *Analects* of Confucius (551–479 BCE), Mozi (470–391 BCE), Mencius (372–289 BCE), Zhuangzi (369–286 BCE), Xunzi

(313-238 BCE), the *Lunheng* of Wang Chong (27-c.100), and others. The most common character suggestive of the implicit use of the concept of truth seems to be *rán* 然, starting in the *Analecets*, where it is used as “affirmation of some statement or reiteration of some situation” (45).

Shí as potentially a truth concept makes its appearance in the *Mengzi* (the book of Mencius). In the section on *Mengzi* (53-58), *shí* in 4B45 is given the meaning, “fruit(full)” (54). But later on *shí* in the same passage is assigned the meaning “truth or essence” (147).

The author engages in an extensive discussion of Mozi’s “three standards theory.” We should accord to the Mohists a “pragmatist” (18) or “pragmatic” (63) theory of truth, in which they “collapsed the distinction between the normative and descriptive” (66).

In the chapter on Xunzi there is an extensive discussion of *zhèngmíng* 正名 (rectification of names) and ritual in terms of absolutism versus pluralism and realism versus conventionalism. The author claims (98): “Perhaps Xunzi’s greatest contribution to truth theory was his definition of the concept of *shí*” (understanding *shí* as reality, including events, thought, abstract entities). It is “necessary for a statement (or *míng*) to correspond with reality” (83). It would have been helpful to connect *shí* explicitly to truth, instead of stipulating that to “distinguish *shí* (actuality/reality)” is the same as “to grasp the *truth*” (98).

The author argues that Zhuangzi is not a *radical* or thoroughgoing sceptic, perspectivist, or relativist, but a “semi-relativist or hybrid perspectivist” (116). Most human concepts are perspective-dependent (111), but some perspectives are “better” in being more effective, expansive, accurate (108), because there are universal “meta-level claims” (116). A statement is made true within a perspective by “perspective-independent statements that are presumably supposed to be true of the *dao* itself” (109).

Shí is not mentioned in connection with Zhuangzi. Zhuangzi’s position is described as “anti-truth” (106), “concerning *early Chinese* views of truth, not Western views of truth” (106), challenging the “truth-seeking project itself” (104). It is not clear what these early Chinese views of truth are. The author notes correctly that, according to most commentators whose native language is English, the discussion of *shí* in Zhuangzi’s *Qinlun* is not “one concerning truth” (114), but one concerning standards of right/wrong. But, if this is so, it remains unclear what the author has in mind when he speaks of the “fledged-out theories of *truth*,” which Zhuangzi would be criticizing, or the “views concerning *truth* of early Confucians and Mohists” (106, emphasis added).

Zhuangzi’s “perspectivist theory of truth in which only universally applicable or *dao-correspondent* statements are unproblematically true” (118) is refined and improved in the *Huainanzi* (before 139 BCE). On page 20 of the book under review it states that the *Huainanzi* evaluates *yán* in terms of *shí* and *xū* 虛, but in the full section on the *Huainanzi* (119-123), this is not mentioned anymore. Here it is explained how Zhuangzi’s “theory of truth” is developed, using the root/branches model. Different schools present different perspectives. The schools are the branches, *dao* is the root.

In addition to the *Huainanzi*, the *Shizi* (c. 330 BCE) and the *Lushi Chunqiu* (around 239 BCE) support “convergence of the many perspectives [on the truth]” (126), instead of being exclusivist. All branches converge on the *dao*: a convergence of many partial perspectives. This may be called “essentialist pluralism” (as distinct from non-essentialistic pluralism associated with religious pluralism): all branches are *necessary*.

Throughout the book, the author repeats many times that the summit (144) of a robust theory of *shí* can be found in the *Lunheng* (10, 16, 20, 52-53, 66, 71, 98, 99, 106). The author argues that *shí* 實 is what makes a statement either *shì* (是, for moral statements) or *rán* (然, for non-moral statements). (The treatment of the difference of *shì* and *rán* is disputable. Some scholars will say that the difference has to do with grammar, not with the fact/value distinction.) Therefore, *shí* is a second-order *pluralistic* property, “the property of having *properties* such that the truth-making description [*rán* or *shì*] is met” (161). Instead of the *dao*-based line in the *Zhuangzi* and *Huainanzi*, reality is understood in terms of *shí* instead of *dao* (83); presumably because “humans naturally seek” *rán* and *shì* (161).

The author’s interpretation of the *Lunheng* is not convincing. Observing that *shí* is of central concern in the *Lunheng* does not yet entail that *truth* is a/the central concern. More importantly, it is announced several times (153, 156) that chapters in the *Lunheng* show the connection of *shí* with *shí* and *rán* 然否, but nothing is forthcoming to support this. On page 153, it is announced two times that the *Lunheng* shows the connection

of *shí* and *shìfēi* and *ránfǒu*, but nothing is forthcoming. There is one citation (only) in which *shìfēi* and *ránfǒu* are used in the same passage (辯照是非之理，使後進曉見然否之分), repeated two times (145, 157), but nowhere “connected” to *shí*. The section labeled “Wang Chong’s theory of Truth” (145-150) describes in clear terms the proffered “pluralistic” theory, but without any support from the *Lunheng*.

The author’s speculations about *shí* being a unifying second-order concept (149, 158, 160, 163-4) are suggestive, but such suggestions can also be made (and have been made) with respect to other texts or characters, as the author acknowledges (65).

The author is correct to note that the character *shí* has a central role in the *Lunheng* (being used 647 times according to the database of the Chinese Text Project), and so do *shì* and *rán* (occurring 719 and 635 times respectively). However, the author provides no support for his suggestion that the *Lunheng* would be saying something about the *relation* of the “first-order” *shìfēi* and *ránfǒu* on the one hand, and the “second-order” *shí* and *xū* on the other.

The book contains many perceptive remarks concerning the philosophers and texts covered. However, for this reader, the concepts and theories of truth presented are too much based on stipulation, speculation, and lack of clarity to be convincing.

Proof reading could have been better.

Jaap van Brakel is professor emeritus in the Higher Institute of Philosophy at the University of Leuven. He has about 200 publications on his name in a variety of disciplines. Most recently: Lin Ma and Jaap van Brakel, *Fundamentals of Comparative and Intercultural Philosophy* (SUNY Press, 2016).